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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN AMBASSADOR ARGUES RUSSIA CAN'T SUPPORT  
IRAN SANCTIONS BECAUSE OF POSSIBLE IRANIAN RETALIATORY MOVES

Classified By: Ambassador Richard W. Erdman:Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

1. (S) We do not follow Moscow reporting on the Iran nuclear issue but report the following November 7 conversation between Russian Ambassador Vladimir Titorenko and Ambassador in case it sheds additional light on Russian thinking and actions in the leadup to the IAEA board meetings later this month.

2. (S) Over dinner November 7, Russian Ambassador Titorenko, a fluent Arab speaker and Middle East specialist, shared his analysis of Iran, its nuclear ambitions, and President Ahmadinejad's recent call for "wiping Israel off the map." On the nuclear issue, Titorenko agreed we should continue to work together to persuade Iran not to pursue a nuclear weapons capability via mastery of the full nuclear fuel cycle. But he argued that at the end of the day, "as with India and Pakistan, it would not/not be possible to prevent a determined Iran from going nuclear."

3. (S) During considerable back and forth, Ambassador stressed that a nuclear-weapons capable Iran would be a highly destabilizing factor in the region. It was in the collective interest of the great powers to join together to prevent such a development, including by adopting economic sanctions if necessary. Disunity on this point would be an open invitation for Iranian misbehavior and produce the very outcome we all wished to avoid. Ahmadinejad's recent call for the destruction of Israel was another reminder why we needed to prevent a nuclear-weapons capable Iran. In the absence of strong actions and firm positions by others, it could not be assumed that a country like Israel, faced with calls for its destruction coming from a country on the verge of acquiring a nuclear weapons capability would stand idly by.

4. (S) Titorenko went on to argue that Russia could never support sanctions against Iran. In his analysis, Russian interests were simply too vulnerable to Iranian retaliatory measures to permit this. For now, Iran was not causing problems in Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Chechnya, and other Muslim areas of direct interest to Russia. But in the event Russia supported sanctions, this could quickly change and Iran could retaliate by stirring up serious trouble and instability in sensitive areas, including even inside Russia, with its increasingly significant Muslim population. Titorenko argued as well that economic sanctions against Iran were in any case unlikely to work because of Iran's size, resources, capabilities, importance, and location. It could not be isolated as Libya was. He also cautioned that if we moved to adopt economic sanctions, Iran would significantly step up its unhelpful activities in Iraq, greatly complicating stabilization efforts and complicating life for us there.

5. (S) Offering a not very flattering glimpse into at least how some Russians view French firmness on this and other issues, Titorenko argued that the Iranians had also taken France's measure. They "knew" France would ultimately back down from any sanctions threats, having concluded that France would not want to jeopardize its economic and other interests vis a vis Iran. In this regard, they also knew that they were dealing with a country that in World War II had not put up much of a fight in response to German attacks, surrendering to the Germans in just thirty days. Regarding Ahmadinejad's call for Israel's destruction, Titorenko argued "he didn't really mean it." Despite Iran's posturing, Iran and Israel were actually natural allies vis a vis the Arabs. In this context, Ahmadinejad's statement, he theorized, was actually designed to curry favor with Arabs and deflect attention away from issues where Iranian behavior provoked concern among Arabs.

ERDMAN